

EUROPEAN CRISIS: Key Developments of the Past 48 Hours

October 19, 2015¹

POLITICS

EU resettlement proposal: Brussels will propose a large-scale refugee resettlement scheme early next year in a move that could see 200,000 migrants distributed across the bloc directly from camps in countries such as Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. The European Commission plans to propose a “structural EU-wide resettlement scheme” in March as part of a host of reforms aimed at stemming the flow of people from Turkey and nearby countries into the EU. Massive resettlement is seen as part of a quid pro quo of any deal with Turkey, which the EU is hoping to persuade to play a bigger role in stemming the flow of migrants to Europe. (G. Maniatis)

Merkel and Erdogan: The two agreed to push the EU to speed up a deal providing visa-free travel for Turkish nationals and a readmission agreement that will allow European countries to return migrants to Turkey, setting a target date of July 2016. Ankara and Berlin will also press Brussels to start negotiations on EU criteria on economic and monetary policies in an effort to re-energize Turkey’s stalled bid to join the bloc. Erdogan reiterated Turkey’s four-year-old call for a buffer zone, warning that

¹ Contributions from OSIFE, IMI and news reports.

renewed Syrian regime offensives backed by Russian airstrikes threaten to trigger new waves of migrants.

Merkel's German partners pushed back today: "We shouldn't make too many concessions to Turkey: joining the EU is not on the agenda," Gerda Hasselfeldt, a senior member of the Christian Social Union (CSU), sister party to Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU), told Die Welt. "An accession of Turkey to the EU is out of the question for me," Stephan Mayer said. (G. Maniatis)

Germany

New asylum law: The German Bundestag approved a new "law to speed up asylum procedures", which includes provisions to: speed up the asylum process to a maximum of three months (average processing time currently ca. five months); add more personnel for the BAMF (the asylum agency); change construction regulations to enable quick building of new reception and shelter facilities before the winter starts (Germany had a freak and early snow storm this week, which threw conditions of refugees still housed in tents into the limelight); open integration courses not just for accepted asylum seekers, but also for those still in process and for migrants in deferred action status; have the federal government pay 670 Euros per month per asylum seeker to states who house them. More points:

- Asylum seekers will receive support in the form of

goods, not cash; critics say it limits choice and is an administrative nightmare;

- Asylum seekers without a high chance to remain in Germany (Bleibeperspektive) will have to stay in first reception centers for up to six months (asylum seekers from safe countries even until their claim is decided); critics say it will lead to more violence and chaos in the overcrowded shelters and puts women and children in particular at risk;
- Asylum seekers who have been rejected will only receive what is defined as basic care (which includes shelter, food, clothes, emergency health care) until their deportation; critics say deportations can take an intolerably long time;
- Deportations will no longer be announced beforehand to decrease flight risk; critics say deportations are traumatic and people must have a chance to prepare (getting school certificates for kids, taking medicines with them);
- Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro are now designated safe countries; critics lament the concept of safe states and doubt the effectiveness of the safe country designation in reducing flows. (G. Maniatis)

Candidate in Cologne attacked, wins election: A political candidate who police say was stabbed in the neck in Cologne, Germany, for her views in support of migrants and refugees coming to the country was elected mayor on Sunday. Henriette Reker, an independent candidate

who runs the city's programs for migrants, was stabbed several times in the neck on Saturday, police said. The attack was "targeted and deliberate," Norbert Wagner, the head of the local criminal investigation unit, said at a news conference. "In his plea, [the attacker] said that he committed this act out of xenophobic motivation." (G. Maniatis)

Switzerland vote: The Swiss People's Party won its best result ever in Sunday's election, capitalizing on voters' unease about an influx of foreigners just as Europe faces its biggest refugee crisis in decades. The anti-immigrant, fiscally conservative SVP won 65 seats in Switzerland's lower house, up from 54 in 2011, according to the Federal Statistic's Office, which show the party got 29.4 percent of the vote. That's ahead of the Social Democrats, who fell to 43 seats, and the pro-business Free Democrats, or FDP, which advance to 33 seats. A poll for Swiss broadcaster SRG forecast such a shift, with the SVP coming in first. The SVP's previous best showing in the 200-member lower house was in 2007, when it won 62 seats on 28.9 percent of the vote. (G. Maniatis)

Czech provocation: Czech President Milos Zeman on Friday again lashed out at migrants from the Middle East and Africa, targeting the full Islamic veil for covering up female beauty. "We'll be deprived of women's beauty, because they'll be covered from head to toe," Zeman said in a chat with employees of a butcher's shop in the eastern village of Lehotice. "This would obviously be an

advantage for some women, but they're few and far between,” the 71-year-old added, quoted by local media. The outspoken leftwinger is known for his controversial remarks. (G. Maniatis)

Serbia

More than 10,000 migrants are currently in Serbia, stranded by limits imposed further west in Europe, the UN refugee agency said on Monday, and warned of shortages in aid. Thousands of people clamored to enter Croatia from Serbia on Monday after a night spent in the cold and mud, their passage west slowed by a Slovenian effort to limit the flow of refugees into western Europe. The refugees at the border were held back by Croatian police, where refugee camps are full to capacity. In western Croatia, up to 2,000 more people spent the night on a train stranded near the border with fellow EU member Slovenia which was refusing entry. (News report)

CIVIL SOCIETY

(all reports below by Jordi Vaquer, OSIFE)

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During a visit by OSIFE director Jordi Vaquer, Serbian NGOs working with refugees confirmed important new trends: Afghans, not Syrians, seem to be the largest group of new arrivals and there also is an increase of people of

other nationalities (Iraqis, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis). Other updates:

- An increase in unaccompanied minors is clear;
- There is a new route via Bulgaria (500/600 enter Serbia through the Bulgarian border);
- Most refugees no longer stay in Belgrade;
- There is now a direct train from the Macedonian to the Croatian border; transportation, unlike in Croatia, is not organized by governments, but by private and public transport operators;
- The Hungarian border is nearly fully sealed; perhaps 100/150 a day still make the crossing. Families are let through and single young men are kept in 'transit centers', although those who do escape from there are accepted in the northbound special trains leaving from Széged.

Refugees no longer in central Belgrade: Just as in Athens two weeks ago, last week the most visible presence of refugees in central Belgrade disappeared, in particular tent camps in parks. Refugees are now taken to a previously half-empty asylum center, better conditioned for cold weather.

In general, refugees spend as little time as possible in Serbia and very few remain for more than a couple of days or apply for asylum, despite the encouragement and support offered by Serbian NGOs

Serbian society helping migrants: In Belgrade the TRAG Foundation (grantee of OSF Serbia and other international foundations) has organized a depot where migrants can find donations of clothes, food and non-food items.

Donations from citizens of Belgrade continue to arrive and volunteers staff the center. Volunteers are also active in the camps, including some coming from Bosnia (students from the United World College in Mostar).

Serbian and Croatian politicians rewarded for their positive stance on refugees: Amidst a general climate of sympathy for refugees, positive media reporting and demonstrations of strong political leadership, Prime Ministers Aleksandar Vucic (Serbia) and Zoran Milanovic (Croatia) have seen their popularity increase during the crisis. Milanovic, who will run for reelection on November 8, has managed to reverse negative polls (his party was 10 percent behind, now it is one percent behind) and is now neck and neck with the nationalist HDZ thanks to his government's management of the crisis. This can also be attributed to Milanovic's confrontational style with the governments of Serbia (including border closure) and Hungary (with ongoing bilateral tension), which have reinforced his image as a strong leader.

Hungary

Refugees suffer after Hungary closes the border: The closure of Hungary's borders with Croatia and with

Slovenia (the latter, not just an intra-EU, but an intra-Schengen border) on Friday October 16 is causing complications in the Balkans. Despite relative smooth running over the weekend, the situation escalated on Sunday evening; activists report up to 12 hour queues in the cold, insufficient sanitary facilities and some claims of inadequate food provisions. According to UNHCR, up to 10,000 got trapped in the rain and cold at the Serbian-Croatian border. Organizations are struggling to offer even the most basic help, such as cover from rain.

Game of numbers between Croatia, Slovenia and Austria: Austria has said it will only take in up to 1500 persons a day, while Croatia insists Slovenia should accept 5000 a day—Slovenia says it will take in up to 2500 per day. This could lead to several complications. If Croats start putting the refugees up in provisional housing/tents around Zagreb these people might on their own account (unlike the current situation with Croatian authorities transporting people with buses/trains) start coming to the Slovenian/Schengen border.

- Such a situation could lead to scenarios we witnessed briefly in September with crowds of people stranded at the border for days;
- Slovenia is likely to act slow to avoid high numbers of people on its own territory which in turn means numbers risk growing on the Croatian side;

- This could again lead to a halt in communication between Slovenian and Croatian authorities/police as it happened last time around;
- Added to this is the political tension in both Croatia and Slovenia, where right wing politicians are starting to side with Orban's approach.

OSIFE grantees active in Slovenia and Croatia: In Slovenia, the Peace Institute launched a project funded by OSIFE working with media and preparing important information for asylum seekers. In Croatia the Centre for Peace Studies, also with OSIFE funding, has started a pro-refugee public opinion campaign, local events in places where refugee corridors and camps are situated, and a series of papers on government policies. The two campaigns try to reinforce positive public discourse and counter the emerging nationalist rhetoric.

Human Rights League under pressure in Slovakia: The Ministry of Interior in Slovakia has approached the UNHCR requesting that they cease its partnership with one of its implementing partners, the Human Right League. The group has been vocal about the Slovak police using excessive force against refugees in a reception center in September. The ministry claims that the League exerts “non-constructive criticism of police practices.” This is a worrying first sign of how far the government is ready to go to crack down on vocal civil society actors.

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